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Politics by numbers: poverty reduction discourse, contestations and regime legitimacy in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

There are contradictory statistics about the number of poor people and changes in number of poor people in Ethiopia with statistics ranging from 26 to 86% of the total population in 2013. This paper analyzed how such contradictory statistics feed into national politics focusing on who uses which statistics and based on what justifications of authoritativeness. Drawing from data collected from print newspapers, blogs, websites, published articles, party publications, and interviews with four key informants and combining an actor's centered discourse analysis (ACDA) with Van Dick's (1997) approach of identifying and analyzing political discourses, the paper deconstructed the poverty statistics debate in Ethiopia to understand the basic contestations. Synthesis of the data shows that poverty numbers are being used as tools for, and manifestations of, ongoing power struggles in Ethiopia whereby different actors selectively use poverty statistics that promote their political agenda. While doing so, the underlying rationale of actors for choosing one statistics over another was not based on the merit of their preferred set of statistics over the others but on the suitability of the data for their political purpose. As such, the government disregards statistics except its own which portray rapid poverty decline in the country while opposition groups actively use and promote statistics coming from international organizations that depict increasing poverty or a slow rate of reduction of poverty. The paper argues that the underlying cause of such politicization of numbers is linked with the developmental statism ideology of the ruling party in Ethiopia and how it tries to justify its rule in Ethiopia – claiming that it is reducing poverty and bringing development in Ethiopia and therefore should be allowed to continue in power. Therefore, in debating poverty numbers what is being debated is not just the statistics but the legitimacy of the government, hence politics by numbers.

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Introduction

There are two sources of legitimacy for any regime: procedural or political and performance-based legitimacy (World Bank 2011). While the bases of procedural legitimacy have normative features like democratic procedures, rule of law and constitutionalism,

performance legitimacy is based on how well the government does in objectives like economic growth and poverty reduction. In non-democratic regimes, performance in economic growth and poverty reduction are crucial sources of regime legitimacy. Drawing from the experience of East Asian countries, Alagappa (1995, p. 293) indicated that ‘in the absence of an established normative order, the procedural element can’t be the primary basis on which political authority is claimed’. As the result, other rationales like performance or normative goals will be more important in the legitimation of governments.

Nevertheless, legitimation based on performance is always dependent on the level of consensus on the desirability of the goals, and the extent of progress made to the goals. Due to the global community’s concern as reflected in MDGs and its appealing to large number of poor people, one of the crucial performance goals in developing countries is poverty reduction. However, as Fisher (2013) emphasizes, measuring the reduction of poverty is very difficult, and national measurements of poverty are contentious, even in the best of cases such as China and India. As such poverty knowledge is a manifestation of ‘the influence of institutional arrangements in other ways as well, and in particular the uneasy, and changing, relations’ among these different actors (O’Connor 2001, p. 10).

In so far as the state’s legitimacy is perceived to be reliant on the extent of poverty reduction, the measurement and reporting of the progress will be an inherent political project. Although there is a considerable discussion of politics of poverty measurement and poverty knowledge in the western world (Citro and Michael 1995, for the US; Gordon 2000 for Europe), similar analysis of the politics of poverty statistics in connection with regime legitimacy in developing countries is very rare.

Ethiopia offers an interesting case study to analyze the connection between regime legitimacy and poverty statistics. First, there is a controversy about poverty prevalence. According to the government’s statistics, only 26% of the population is living under the national poverty line. However, statistics from Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) estimate multidimensional poverty as a staggering 87% in 2013. While estimation discrepancies between national poverty and OPHI poverty are not unique to Ethiopia and might be caused by a number of measurement procedures, with the estimates of OPHI three times that of the official statistics, the discrepancy between the two estimates is extreme. Second, with poor democratic credentials, the Ethiopian government is increasingly relying on justifying its rule on its performance in economic growth and poverty reduction.

This article examines on what justifications statistical users on poverty prevalence in Ethiopia select one set of statistics over another alternative statistics. The article also analyzes the alliances of different actors in the statistical controversy and the link with the broader legitimacy contestation the regime is facing. Synthesis of the data shows that poverty numbers are being used as one of the tools in a ongoing power struggle in Ethiopia whereby statistics that confirm an already predefined political opinion are used selectively by actors to advance their opinion. As such, poverty statistics are being used selectively to serve a political objective – politics by numbers.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section provides an account of the underlying causes of legitimacy contestations for the ruling regime. The section concludes with a discussion of why poverty reduction has become an important political objective and hence source of legitimacy for the ruling party. The next section presents the methodology of the research. The third section presents the alternative

poverty statistics, the discrepancies, and the manifestations of politicization of the numbers. The last part forwards concluding remarks.

The quest for legitimacy and contestations

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democracy Front (EPRDF), the ruling party of Ethiopia, has its origins in the protracted civil war that began in 1974 and ended in 1991 when ethnic-based liberation fronts defeated the overbrutal military regime. The EPRDF is a front of four ethno-nationalist parties consisting of the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo Peoples Democratic organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPOM) through which it is intended to represent the four largest ethnic groups: Tigre, Amhara, Oromo, and nationalities in the Southern part of the region, respectively. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), led the insurgency war and helped establish the other three parties at the last stage of the war to form the EPRDF.

With more than 80 ethnic groups, managing diversity has continued to be the main challenge for the Ethiopian state. Regimes in the past had tried to address ethnic tensions by fostering one Ethiopianism identity and discouraging ethnic divisions. EPRDF took a rather radical approach of restructuring the state into nine ethno-linguistic based regional states, each with their own judicial, executive and legislative power including the right to self-determination up to secession (Vaughan 2003). However, the prescription of detailed policies of the ruling party over the regional parties appears to be contradictory to the hallmark practice of division of power between the center and states (Fiseha 2006). Besides, most people 'claim that the new arrangement in practice institutionalizes a new and high discriminatory constellation favoring a new EPRDF; primarily Tigrayan elite' (Vaughan 2003, p. 37). As a result, instead of national unity, the ethnic federalism has led to increased division by ethnicizing politics, and tensions, controversies and disputes over border and administrative arrangements (ARPD 2008, p. 2).

The EPRDF follows a unique political ideology called revolutionary democracy that has its own roots and essence in socialism. However, by the time the EPRDF came to power in 1991, there were global changes that forced EPRDF to consign its socialist rhetoric to fit to the new global order and ensure that it receives the necessary aid to run the depilated economy. EPRDF decided to pretend its version of democracy is compatible with liberal democracy and embarked on a liberal oriented democratization process; civil societies, opposition parties and private media were established (Clark 2000). The international community was very hopeful about the democratic process in the country to the extent that they started to refer to the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi as one of the new generation of African leaders (Clapham 2009). EPRDF won two rounds of national elections with no major threat from weak and divided opposition forces (Aallen and Tronvoll 2009, p. 193).

However, the pretense couldn't sustain the 2005 election when divided political opposition groups formed two major alliances and managed to win unprecedented numbers of seats including all the seats in the capital, Addis Ababa. Yet, the final results from election board declared the EPRDF winner (National Election Board of Ethiopia 2005) and the oppositions claimed election fraud. The post-election crisis that resulted in killing of 200 people, the arrest of tens of thousands and jailing of opposition party

leaders and independent journalists ‘revealed that when faced with the real threat of being ousted from power, the incumbent EPRDF was determined to stay in power by all means’ (Rakner *et al.* 2007, p. 19). Since then, the regime has been regularly blamed for the repression of human rights, the violation of freedom of speech, the prosecution of journalists and so on (Human Right Watch 2010a, 2010b, 2013, Amnesty International 2012). The 2010 national election, in which the EPRDF won all but two seats, was rated as ‘short of standards of a free and fair election’ (European Union Election Observer mission 2010) and ‘re-establishing the one party state’ (Tronvoll 2011). In the 2015 election, the EPRDF and its ally parties won 100% of the seats in the national parliament. However, only after months of the 2015 election the regime was faced with outright protest and resistance from Oromo and Amhara, the two largest ethnic groups, who are calling for ending marginalization of the two groups from political power, fairer distribution of power, and economic opportunities. The protests resulted in the killing of hundreds of protestors and the detention of thousands (Abbink 2016).

With contested procedural legitimacy, the regime has shifted towards relying increasingly on performance-based legitimacy such as poverty reduction and economic growth. EPRDF publications discuss the experience of successful developmental states and its relevance for the Ethiopian context (EPRDF 2010, 2011). The ruling party explicitly expresses that to continue in power it has to ensure rapid economic development and reduce poverty. Therefore, for EPRDF poverty is viewed as an existential threat. With its history of famine, for many foreigners Ethiopia is still a land of famine and poverty. The ruling party proclaimed that ‘the main enemy of the county is poverty’ and called for all effort to be directed against poverty (EPRDF 1995, 2010). In explaining the security threats, the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) urged ‘the danger is that widening poverty may lead to our collapse’ that ‘the war on poverty [is] most important and central elements in national security’ (MOFA 2002, p. 18). Aside from the five-year development plans, there are poverty reduction strategies put in place by the government specifically aiming at poverty reduction.

Methodology

Understanding the ongoing controversy about the poverty statistics in Ethiopia requires an eclectic approach to data collection and analysis. Moreover, the methodology used is informed by unique characteristics of the controversy. First, as would be expected, many of the debates represented in this paper are happening in major urban areas and in the media. The usage of the media is intended to make each party’s argument accessible to the public which both parties of the debate wanted to inform and influence. Consequently, for this paper, I draw heavily on printed, online materials and government and party publications of both the ruling and opposition parties. Field work was conducted from 7 June to 3 September 2013 and included the collection of a range of documents, speeches, online and print materials, and magazine articles written in between 2003 (when the economy, according to the government statistics, started to register double digit economic growth) and 2013. Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) reports of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), reports of International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and

World Bank reports were collected. In addition seven interviews with key proponents of the two sides of the controversy and four interviews with experts at the Central Statistics Agency were held.

In line with the paper's proposition of understanding statistical narratives as political discourses, the analysis used in this paper follows the suggestions of Van Dijk (1997). Van Dijk identified three elements that have to be analyzed to understand political discourses. These are context, actors and content. Van Dijk defined contexts broadly in terms of 'political and communicative events and encounters, with their own settings (time, place, circumstances), occasions, intentions, functions, goals, and legal or political implications' (Van Dijk 1997, p. 14). Context is hard to delimit, however. In this paper, I analyzed the political economy of poverty reduction in the last decade in Ethiopia with special emphasis on the way the ruling regime views its relationship with the society. A particular focus is given to how the regime tries to legitimize itself in the last decade amidst the contestations it is facing.

The second component of political discourse is actors. Van Dijk, suggested that analyzing who is the actor or participant in debate or controversy is the 'easiest, and not altogether misguided' (Van Dick 1997, p. 12) way to understand political discourses. In understanding actors, I have analyzed the interactions among them and what historical or ideological similarities can be identified. Actors are here understood not as holders of fixed attributes. Indeed, they engage in exchange of discourses, actors interest or self-awareness may evolve. To put it in other words, 'ideas "transform" perceptions of interest, shaping actors' self-understanding of their own interest' (Sikkink 1991, p. 243 cited in Lavers 2013, p. 20). Besides, these ideas and arguments are embodied in historical socio-political context at national level but also influenced by international practices and norms. However, it has always been very difficult to empirically capture the influence of ideas on actors' interests (Hall 2010). Therefore, rather than taking an ideational approach, this paper takes an actors-focused approach where the focus is on which actor is arguing what instead of which idea is influencing which actor. I therefore, first identify ideas (arguments) and characterize actors' attributes.

Van Dijk, however, warned that the nature of actors will not automatically make one controversy a political discourse. He noted that 'even politicians are not always involved in political discourse, and the same is obviously true for most other participants, such as the public or citizens in general, or even members of social movements or action groups' (Van Dijk 1997, p. 14). Therefore Van Dijk suggests, one has to also analyze the content of the controversy in the form of practices and activities. To understand the content, I used argumentation analysis. Argumentation often involves a number of ways of advancing one's beliefs through strategies such as claiming expert knowledge and playing with emotions. Departing from a limited analysis of evidence of a research project, to analysis of broader poverty knowledge, 'allows an examination of the political and epistemological dynamics in the production and use of such knowledge, while still including (but also reframing) the insights gained into evidence and research' (Jones *et al.* 2009, p. 1). I have analyzed the justifications underpinning claims of authoritative evidence and the strategies and practices used by each actor to undermine other evidence and enhance their agency of influencing the debate.

The contestations on poverty prevalence trend in Ethiopia

Parties of the contestation

Based on the synthesis of the data, two groups are identified; one group believes poverty has declined, and the other argues poverty has not declined or that it has reduced only marginally. For the purpose of this article, I have dubbed these two groups as *poverty reduction believers* and *poverty reduction doubters*. Each group consisting of diverse groups of individuals including scholars, politicians and journalists.

Members of the poverty reduction believers group argue that poverty has rapidly declined in Ethiopia in the last decade. They also believe that the economic growth in Ethiopia in the last decade has contributed a lot to poverty reduction. This group consists of the ruling party, the state owned Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, *Addis Zemen* and *Ethiopian Herald*, the Central Statistics Agency (CSA, hereafter) and other government institutions that are legally expected to use the poverty data from CSA. Some media not owned by the state such as Walata Information Center and Ethiopian News Agency and foreign-based online news outlets including Aiga forum and Tigray online fall to this group.

On the other hand, the poverty reduction doubters reject the government's statistics and believe poverty has not declined. They argue that not only are the government's economic growth statistics overestimated but also that even by the government's growth statistics, the growth is not pro-poor and cannot result in such rapid poverty decline as claimed by the poverty reduction believers. The group consists of a coalition of political parties such as Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) and Blue Party, media and scholars. Other opposition groups have argued for this position for private newspapers, but it is difficult to be sure whether their position is official or just expressing their stands. The Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) and the Zehabesha Newspaper are among foreign-based media outlets and many of the print newspapers in Ethiopia including *Addis Neger* (until 2010), *Feteh* (now defunct), and *Addis Guday* are also in this group.

Arguments and evidence of poverty reduction believers

Findings of National Poverty Surveys: National poverty surveys are the main evidence cited by this group. Four national Household Consumption and Expenditure surveys (HCES) were conducted by the CSA since 1996 while the latest and fifth-round HCES is being conducted in 2016. As [Table 1](#) shows, according to the results from these surveys poverty head count has declined by 34.9% between 1995 and 2011. In a budget speech, the Minister of Finance and Economy Development (MOFED) reported that in 2012/13 the poverty head count has further declined to 27.6%¹ (Ahmed [2013](#)). Poverty is more prevalent and severe in rural areas than urban areas with figures from the latest survey of 2010/11 showing 30.45% head count poverty in rural areas compared to 25.7% in urban areas. Nevertheless, the overall reduction in poverty is substantial. The government and its allies present this poverty reduction as very high level of achievement to be a celebrated story, and the statistics are inevitably quoted in many political speeches, and government reports (See MOFED [2012](#), [2013](#), Ahmed [2013](#)).

Table 1. Poverty prevalence trends in Ethiopia.

Reporting Level	Indicator	Poverty Trends				
		1995/6	1999/00	2004/5	2010/11	Change (from 1996 to 2011 in %)
National	Head Count index	0.455	0.442	0.387	0.296	34.9
	Poverty gap index	0.129	0.119	0.083	0.078	39.5
	Poverty severity Index	0.051	0.045	0.027	0.031	39.2
Rural	Head Count index	0.475	0.454	0.393	0.304	36
	Poverty gap index	0.134	0.122	0.085	0.080	40.3
	Poverty severity Index	0.053	0.046	0.027	0.032	39.6
Urban	Head Count index	0.332	0.369	0.351	0.257	22.5
	Poverty gap index	0.099	0.101	0.077	0.069	30.3
	Poverty severity Index	0.041	0.039	0.026	0.027	34.1

Source: MOFED 2012, p. 9.

Pro-poor economic growth

According to the government statistics presented in Table 2, Ethiopia has experienced fast economic growth especially for the last decade. The poverty reduction believers draw on these statistics to argue that the economic growth has contributed to reduction in poverty in Ethiopia.

The *poverty reduction believers* argue that economic growth was not only rapid but also is a pro-poor economic growth that has resulted in millions moving out of poverty. This can be seen from the quote below in an article featured on a government website:

This economic growth brought positive trends in reducing poverty, in both urban and rural areas, reducing the number of Ethiopians living under extreme poverty by 9 percent within five years. Overall it also made considerable progress in most of the human development indicators. (Yifter 2013)¹

They also argue that pro-poor programs are the reason for rapid poverty decline:

Such achievement in the reduction of poverty can be attributed to the wide-ranging and multi-faceted *pro-poor programs* that have been implemented in rural and urban areas such as intensification of agriculture, infrastructural development, food security programs, the pro-poor urban development activities (such as development of micro and small scale enterprise development and use of cobblestone in urban road construction, housing construction. (MOFED 2012, p. 13, emphasis mine)

Poverty reduction believers are convinced that economic growth has contributed to poverty reduction in the country either by providing finance for pro-poor programs or through a growth pattern that disproportionately benefit the poor (i.e. pro-poor growth).

Table 2. GDP growth (constant price) of Ethiopia.

Year	GDP growth rate (Gov't report)
2003/4	13.6
2004/5	11.8
2005/6	10.8
2006/7	8.5
2007/8	10.8
2008/9	8.8
2009/10	12.6
2010/11	11.3

Source: National Bank of Ethiopia (October 2013).

International organizations' endorsement

The poverty reduction believers argue that not only the statistics produced by the government are convincing but also they have been endorsed by interstate organizations such as the World Bank and IMF. The World Bank development indicators database doesn't provide detailed estimations of poverty in Ethiopia except an estimation of the proportion of people living below 1.25 USD per day at 38.7% in 2011. However, Guang Zhe Chen, the then World Bank Country Director for Ethiopia, praised the government saying that 'two and a half million people in Ethiopia have been lifted out of poverty' and its target to reduce poverty to 22.2% in 2015 is attainable.² Agreeing with the government's claim that there is a 'dramatic decline in the incidence of poverty over the last decade', the IMF praised Ethiopia, for being 'successful in translating economic growth into higher living standards for its citizens' in a pace that has outperformed many Sub-Saharan African countries (IMF 2013, p. 4). Poverty reduction believers use such endorsements of government poverty statistics by IMF and World Bank as a way of dismissing questions about the statistics.

Arguments and evidence of poverty reduction doubters

This group presents arguments-cum-evidence to justify their position that poverty reduction has not happened at all or has happened only very marginally. The first and the main statistics they present are the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) poverty estimate for Ethiopia. Second, methodological gaps in the official poverty surveys and lack of independence and weak capability of statistical system make the poverty reduction and economic growth estimates of the government unreliable and invalid. Each of these are discussed below.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

It is a global estimate of multidimensional poverty by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). MPI measures aspects of deprivation people experience at the same time using three dimensions and ten indicators: two for health (nutrition and child mortality), two for education (years of schooling and child attendance to school), and six for living standards (access to electricity, safe drinking water, quality of house, cooking fuel type, sanitation, and asset ownership). The data for these indicators come from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) of each country.

According to MPI methodology a person will be considered poor if he/she is deprived of one of the three or more of these ten indicators. MPI calculates national poverty values for each country by multiplying headcount ratio of poor (the number of poor people out of the total population) and intensity of poverty, measured by the proportion of indicators in which the poor are deprived simultaneously (for a detailed discussion of the methodology of MPI, see Alkire and Foster 2011). MPI estimates are produced for more than 100 countries, Ethiopia included, that are updated when countries publish new rounds of DHSs.

Ethiopia's MPI was calculated from DHSs conducted in 2000, 2005 and 2010. As Table 3 shows, the MPI estimates the poverty prevalence rate in Ethiopia at 90% in 2005 and 87.3% in 2010. There is a high difference between the national consumption based poverty measure (HICES) and the MPI head count. The MPI estimate of percentage of poor people is more than double that of the HICES in all three points of estimate 2000,

Table 3. Trends of multidimensional poverty in Ethiopia.

Year	MPI indicators			Comparison with national poverty head count	
	MPI score	% of poor people	Average intensity across the poor	% Difference (MPI- national estimate)	Ratio d/nice (MPI: national)
2000	0.678	93.6	72.4%	49.4	2.1
2005	0.582	90.0	64.7%	51.3	2.3
2010	0.564	87.3	64.6	57.7	2.9

Source: Compiled from Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) various years.

2005, and 2010. With such high MPI estimates the report has consistently ranked Ethiopia as the second poorest country after only Niger since 2007.

Poverty reduction doubters tend to depict the MPI as a better poverty measurement than the consumption and income based poverty measures used by the official survey in Ethiopia. Tesfaye (2010b) argues the '\$1.25 per day thresholds have been highly criticized for focusing solely on income. Economists have argued that family income cannot be the only determinant, whether that particular family is extremely poor or not' (paragraph 5). In comparison, the MPI 'shows the nature of poverty better than income alone. Knowing not just who is poor but how they are poor is essential for effective human development programs and policies' (The African Economist 2013). As the result, the release of MPI for Ethiopia is presented as a tool which exposes a new truth about poverty prevalence in Ethiopia:

Until last week, 39 percent of [the] people were classified as living in extreme poverty. That is the *old story*. A '*new*' day has arrived to polish the old threshold; at least theoretically ... The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which measures multidimensional aspects of poverty, shows that 90 percent of the Ethiopian people are today living in extreme poverty ... According to the study, Ethiopia has the lowest performance indices in all three aspects and said to be the poorest of the poor [countries] ... the MPI value of Ethiopia is 0.58. This value is *even greater than that of neighboring countries such as Somalia*. (Tesfaye 2010a, emphasis mine)

Tesfaye also stresses how Ethiopia's MPI was very bad, with the phrase '*even greater than*' Somalia which hadn't had a central government for more than 20 years by then. In an apparent connection of the 19 years EPRDF stayed in power with the high prevalence of poverty in Ethiopia, Tesfaye's article is entitled 'Multidimensional Poverty: A Fruit of 19 Years'.

Methodological gaps of the official poverty surveys

Poverty reduction doubters argue that the four rounds of national surveys have a number of methodological gaps that would affect the validity and reliability of the estimates, and presented five main criticisms. The first gap in the official poverty surveys is the exclusion of some areas from the surveys. The second national poverty survey of 2002 excluded Somali region while the 2005 and 2010/11 survey excluded all areas of Gambella region and nine zones in Afar and Somali region inhabited by non-sedentary populations (See MOFED 2012, 2013). For instance, Devereux and Sharp argue 'the original sampling frame [for the 1999/2000 HICES] was too small and unrepresentative to provide a basis for extrapolating national poverty levels or trends' (Devereux and Sharp 2003, p. 1).

The poverty line is the most important and ‘also the most controversial element of any poverty research’ (Szulc 2006, p. 426). Therefore, the assessment of the trends of poverty in the country is highly dependent on the accuracy and appropriateness of the poverty line. In line with this, the second criticism of poverty reduction doubters is that the poverty line in Ethiopia which is set at 1075 birr (0.60 USD per day in 1996) in the first round, and was used for subsequent surveys indexed for Consumption Price Index (CPI), is very low. Poverty reduction doubters cite qualitative studies and local level quantitative studies which indicate that people can’t buy any kind of food with this amount in any urban center in Ethiopia (Abroad 2011). These they argue that with such low poverty line, ‘[i]t is possible for people to cross the poverty threshold without a qualitative difference in their standard of living’ (Bigsten and Shemeles 2011, p. 835).

The third criticism is the use of only one national poverty line. This group argues the cost of living in regions differs so greatly that using the national CPI to measure poverty is misleading. For instance, Gebremedhin and Whelan examined price and living cost in Ethiopian major cities and found out that cost of living and price vary enormously. They concluded that ‘the use of a country level CPI, which does not account for spatial cost of living differences, gives incorrect poverty estimates’ (Gebremedhin and Whelan 2005, p. 11).

The fourth criticism is that the indicators used for monitoring poverty may not be the appropriate ones because they are inconsistent with qualitative studies of poverty. To support this claim, this group cites qualitative poverty studies that were depicting an increasing poverty contrary to quantitative consumption based measures which indicated a decline in poverty prevalence. For instance, Rahmato and Kidanu’s Ethiopia’s country study for the World Bank *Voices of the Poor* report emphasized that in the 1990s ‘(i) a lot of households have moved from the middle to the lowest category and (ii) a new category of the weak and disabled has been added [*to the poor category*]’ (Rahmato and Kindu 1999, p. 103). Another study of subjective poverty among urban five major cities of Ethiopia concluded that ‘the share of households that perceive themselves as poor has barely changed at all between 1994 and 2009’ (Alem *et al.* 2012, p. 2).

‘The statistics is in mess’: questioning the institutional capacity of poverty monitoring

Poverty reduction doubters argue that the statistical system in Ethiopia lacks capacity to administer accurate and reliable national surveys. Gebremariam argues:

The Central Statistics Agency (CSA) and the National Accounts Department of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development are the two institutions in Ethiopia that are responsible for keeping track of the statistical data and providing analysis on economic performance. But neither organization has the institutional capability to collect reliable and accurate economic data, let alone assemble complete and comprehensive data sets which could serve as empirical bases for economic prognostications. This fact was emphatically stated on March 24, 2010 in the official statement of Paul Mathieu, the IMF team leader who, after conducting an evaluation of the current half fiscal year economic performance of Ethiopia, said: ‘Statistics collection of the country requires transformations, and we advised the government to do that.’ (Gebremariam 2012)

By quoting the IMF team Leader, Gebremariam tries to show that not only the problem of statistical incapacity is indisputable but it has been also recognized by others who

suggested the government to do something. This group draws on IMF to justify its position that the statistical system is incapable. However, IMF's report on the Observance of Standards and Codes (ROSCs) is not available for Ethiopia. According to World Bank statistical capacity assessment, however, Ethiopia ranks as one of the countries with better statistical capacity ranking with scores higher in each year than the African average (Jervan 2013).

For this group, as the result of this institutional weakness, the statistical system in Ethiopia is in mess at the moment. In a piece titled 'In today's Ethiopia, numbers have lost, their Meaning' Chait (2010) wrote:

Given the flagrant tampering with almost all national data, in today's Ethiopia numbers have no meaning. In politics or economics! ... A post-Meles government should hope that the first help it gets is from statisticians without borders to clean the statistical mess we are in. (Chait 2010)

Chat emphasizes that the problem is deep rooted using terms like 'mess', and 'numbers lost meaning'. Besides, Chat's phrase of 'a post-Meles government' is interesting because it signals two tendencies of this group. First, it shows the group's belief that responsibility for the statistic mess is Meles' or his government's (instead of lack of trained human capacity or the large and diverse geography and population of the country that can make statistical system very difficult, for instance). Second, the phrase post-Meles government points out to this group's belief that solving the 'mess' requires deposing Meles and his government from power. As such, what should come first is not cleaning the 'statistical mess', but toppling the government. Then only 'the statistical without borders' can clean the mess.

'Torture the data until it confess': questioning objectivity

Poverty reduction doubters also argue that the statistical system lacks autonomy from the ruling party and as a result the ruling party is using the statistical institutions to fabricate statistics. This can be clearly seen in the quote below from *Fenote Nesanet*, the opposition UDJ party newspaper:

It has always never been clear why the economic performance reports are expected to be approved by the council of ministers. Like other countries, institutions that monitor unemployment, job creation, and economic growth/de-growth etcetera should be autonomous. If we have to believe statistical reports, government should refrain from interfering in works of institutions that produce such reports and should ensure the autonomy of these institutions both in law and practice. However, what is being done now is very clear – torture the data until it confesses. (*Fenote Nesanet* 2012, p. 4)

Furthermore, the fabrication of data is the manifestations of authoritarian nature of the regime. 'Cooking data is the character of many autocratic regimes. They deny autonomy for institutions that collect and gather data' (*Fenote Nesanet* 2012, p. 2). Thus, for poverty reduction doubters, the ruling party is playing statistical game in which 'the bottom line on the regime's statistical claim' is that the figures are cooked up in the Central Statistics Office (Gebremariam 2010).

The poverty reduction doubter group also claim that the government has blocked independent researchers from conducting independent poverty surveys. This is presented as indication that the data was 'cooked up'. For instance, an Ethiopian origin American

Economics professor explained to a pro-opposition TV, ESAT that his research team was expelled from the country within 48 hours from the moment the government knew they were doing poverty assessments (Getachew Begashaw Interview With ESAT 2012, minutes 18:00–25:00).

The economic growth rate is overestimated

The poverty reduction doubters group believes that the economic growth estimates are also overestimated. The IMF has been estimating economic growth as less than the government has for a few years. IMF 2010/11 country economy report stated that ‘strong growth has continued in 2010/11 that the [IMF] estimates at 7.5 percent (compared to an official estimate of 11.4 percent).’ A similar discrepancy is reported for the Economic Update of 2012 (see IMF 2012, p. 1).

This group also criticizes the IMF for not doing detailed analysis beyond stating discrepancies between estimates:

In its official reports, the IMF simply accepts and incorporates at face value the data for GDP growth given to it by the Central Statistics Office (with its own staff estimates) and incorporates those figures ... slavishly (with a wink, nod and a smile) parrots back to the world the same figures with some of its own ‘staff estimates and projections’ ... without so much as qualifying it for completeness, accuracy or reliability’ of the data that comes from a system that IMF said ‘needs massive transformation’ (Gebremariam 2010).

For other members of this group, ‘IMF and UN have no choice but to just use the exaggerated data provided to them [by the Government]’ (Begashaw Interview with ESAT part 2 November 28 2012) and thus, the continuing usage of official statistics is not because the statistics is authentic but because IMF and the World Bank are bound to use government official statistics.

Politics by numbers: manifestations, structures and agency

Controversies can happen for a range of reasons. So what are the manifestations of the political nature of the debate? To answer this question we will analyze the actors in each group and their relationship with the regime, the content of the debate, as well as the strategies of each party to enhance their capacity of maintaining the hegemony of their representation of poverty trends in Ethiopia.

Actors alliance

The first and perhaps defining manifestation of the political nature of the poverty debate is the coalition of members in each group. In explaining the nature of a political discourse, Van Dijk wrote that ‘the easiest, and not altogether misguided, answer is that political discourse is identified by its actors or authors, viz., politicians’ (Van Dijk 1997, p. 12). Indeed, looking into the arrangement of forces debating the poverty numbers, it clearly emerges that the members of each party are the same actors we found in many other political issues. Essentially, those who believe that poverty has reduced include the ruling party and its government apparatus including state media. Other private owned news outlets as Aiga Frum are known to be supporters of the party. A clear indication is that in its

website, the ruling party mentions the website of those media outlets while any of the *poverty reduction doubters'* media outlets are not presented.

Similarly, the arguments of the poverty reduction doubters group are presented either in opposition parties' newspapers, such as *Fenote Nesanet*, or the private presses that are very critical of the government. One of such private presses that has strongly promoted the MPI index was the Amharic weekly *Addis Neger* where Tesfaye was the Economy columnist. The paper had managed to draw the highest readership in the history of Ethiopia's private press until it ceased publication in 2009 and its staff went into exile allegedly receiving imminent threat of prosecution by the government (Berhane 2010). Articles in Aiga forum, a pro-ruling-party website, denounced *Addis Neger* editors when they went exile, labeling their move as 'self-exile' motivated by other interests than fear of imminent prosecution. Besides, although the government denies it was preparing to jail them, later it charged the two editors of the online section of the paper they created after exile, for 'abetting, aiding, and supporting a terrorist group' through their website and sentenced each to eight years' prison in their absence (Oromedia 2012). In addition to these media outlets, scholars who are critical of the government like Gebremariam (2010, 2012), are also among the poverty reduction doubters. The state-owned daily newspaper, *Addis Zemen*, had wrote a couple of times blaming the media outlets airing poverty reduction doubters analysis such as *Addis Neger*, and Individuals such as Gebremariam accusing partial presentation. Such hostilities between the two groups suggest that these two coalitions didn't emerge out of the poverty trend debate but instead are pre-existing groups with political rivalry.

Content of the debate

Although the identity of the actors in debate and their organization is important in understanding a controversy, merely the identity of the participants can't make the debate spontaneously political. Van Dijk notes 'even politicians are not always involved in political discourse, and the same is obviously true for most other participants' (1997, p. 14). Thus, the nature of political debate also depends on the content of the debate.

As the quotes above show, the content of the debate focuses on how much the government is successful in reducing poverty. The source of controversy in poverty knowledge can be either different ontological views of what poverty is or epistemological differences about who is the legitimate knower about poverty (Kura and Sulaiman 2012). However, the central debate of the prevalence of poverty in Ethiopia at the moment seems mainly on the 'correct' number of poor people and to a lesser extent on the method that has to be used to measure poverty. Understandably, such selection of emphasis on numbers is because 'numbers provide a unique means with which to simplify and communicate complex social phenomena' such as poverty (Clegg 2010, p. 474). Through numbers, each party tries to make its story accessible to the ordinary public who lacks both the time and expertise to understand the complex process involved in knowing the trends of poverty in the country.

Another and perhaps the clearest indications of the political driven nature of the debate is the way each party relates the poverty prevalence in the country to the developmental state ideology of the ruling party. The poverty reduction believers argue the developmental

statism was the reason for poverty reduction. In a piece that advances the poverty reduction believers' argument, Yifter argues:

[Meles Zenawi's] vision allowed Ethiopia to establish a strong developmental state, a success story for other African countries to emulate. It was designed to lift the country out of poverty [by] reducing the number of Ethiopians living under extreme poverty. (Yifter 2013)

Another quote from the poverty reduction believers group also attributes the reduction in poverty to the developmental state:

The country's image abroad is changing for the better. One can confidently say that, although a lot more remains to be done, the age-old backwardness, poverty and famine that the country was suffering from are now history. This, no doubt, is the result of the relevance and correctness of the policies of the Ethiopian government led by EPRDF. (Gebresellase 2012)

However, the same developmental state ideology is by the *poverty reduction doubters* for its being the underlying cause for fabrications of numbers.

[...] not achieving the targets stated in the growth and transformation plan (for example, economic growth plan, poverty reduction plan etcetera) means, shaking the developmental state propaganda that EPRDF is standing on. Therefore proclaiming the reduction of poverty and continuity of economic growth (whether it is true or false) has become a matter of existence for EPRDF. (Fenote Nesanet 2012, p. 12)

Structures and strategies to heighten agency

What is constraining each party's attempt to ensure hegemony of their representation is the focus of this section. According to Leipold and Winkel (2013, p. 8) discourse is

both representation (of societal structures) and interaction (of actors) – the former referring to the representation of meaning structures of social practice in (written and spoken) text, the latter referring to the processes and conditions of inter-subjective communication which create these textual representations.

In this continuous and reactive communication, structural factors play an important role in constraining and enhancing the relative position of actors in dominating the discourse. A set of enhancing and constraining factors are discussed for each party below.

For the poverty reduction believers group, led by the government, the first and main enhancing factors is legal-rational power of the government as a representative of the state. Despite the contestations of its legitimacy, and as long as the ruling party is in power, the ruling party commends a legal-rational power. This involves the authority to collect information on the economy of the nation, to provide data for inter-state organizations such as the IMF, World Bank and United Nations.

Although IMF and the World Bank are skeptical of the government statistics, as inter-state organizations they are legally and politically bound to use government statistics in combination with their own estimates and projects which makes them to be part of the legitimizing forces of the discourse of the ruling government. Usually, the IMF and World Bank are accused of constraining poverty reduction in developing countries due to their neo-liberal policies. The governments of Ethiopia, as like many other developing countries, is portrayed as entangled between responding to citizens' demand of resistance

of these financial institutions and the need to receive the finance that would flow from these organizations. In the case of statistics on poverty reduction, however, IMF and World Bank are part of the legitimizing hegemony for the government by promoting its poverty reduction discourses thorough legitimatizing government's statistics, and quoting them in their reports, there by contributing to the governments hegemony of the discourse on poverty statistics in the country. Thus, the inter-state formation of IMF and World Bank, by demanding them to use government's statistics, contributes to silence of voices of actors in difficult relationship with a state. On the other hand, the existence of institutions that are not bound to use government data free from nation states such as OPHI, enhances the agency of the opposition in its attempt to contest the discourse, suggesting how such international initiatives can be used effectively to engage in a state's internal politics.

Poverty reduction believers and the ruling party in particular draw on other strategies to ensure the hegemony of their discourse. One of the strategies is limiting production of alternative knowledge on poverty, by using its database. The full datasets of HICE and WMS, on which the government's poverty reduction reports are based, are not available for public use. Individual researchers can receive micro data per region or a selected number of indicators. However, the full dataset is not available for public use or individual researchers. CSA doesn't allow access to the full data set for researchers 'so that they will not come up with their own reports on national poverty' (CSA Staff C Interview, 21 August 2013). Besides, the micro datasets available on the World Bank database also have a disclaimer that 'household expenditure dataset can't be used to calculate poverty'. As a result, there is no alternative to the government's report based on the full dataset.

This limited access to the dataset is both enhancing and constraining for the poverty reduction doubters group's agency. Although they accuse the government of data manipulation, they can't back up this claim with alternative reports based on the same dataset. However, the continued restriction of access to the dataset can be considered as advantageous for this group because it enables the group to sustain its accusations of data manipulation.

The second strategy of the poverty reduction believers group is to silence alternative knowledge based on other datasets. As we have already seen the main poverty estimate the poverty reduction doubters' group draw on is the MPI index. For instance, despite both local and intentional media coverage of the Ethiopia's poverty statistics in OPHI for years, the government didn't react to the MPI reports presumably because it believed that publicizing the OPHI reports would be detrimental to the government's narrative of rapid decline of poverty.

However, scholars within the poverty reduction believers group tried to undermine the credibility of the OHPI report. For instance Adugna (2010, p. 2) argues 'the OPHI report gives the wrong impression' for three reasons. His first criticism is that the MPI report of 2010 used the 2004 data and hence doesn't reflect the situation in 2010 because 'many changes have been observed in the country since 2004/05' (Adugna 2010, p. 8). However, this is unfair criticism as MPI estimates by OPHI clearly indicated that the estimate is for 2005. Adugna then turned in to the weight of indicators in MPI and comments 'like other people I believe that it is not fair to give equal weight for child mortality and nutrition level in the same family' (Adugna 2010, p. 8). Lastly, he criticizes the inclusion of only 10

indicators in the MPI arguing that ‘at least when we compare it with the MDGs, it is less by thirty eight indicators’ (Adugna 2010, p. 9).

One of the factors for the success of actors in dominating a discourse is their knowledge on the subject matter (Leipold and Winkel 2013). As the result, despite his intention to undermine the MPI, Adunga missed some other fundamental criticisms of the MPI discussed in the literature. First, the cut-off point for poverty status in MPI (set at one-third of the ten indicators) is not only a normative judgment that one can contest, but also ‘does not resolve the more fundamental issue of how the dimensions and cut-offs should be chosen’ in measuring poverty (Fischer 2013, p. 12). To what extent the cut-off point or the composition of the indicators in the Ethiopian context is realistic can be contested. Second, the composite index of MPI, which puts Ethiopia the poorest in the world next to Niger (which the poverty reduction doubters group highly emphasizes), was criticized on two grounds. First, since the basic rationale of the multidimensional poverty is to show poverty in different dimensions, ‘It is not the aggregate index that we need for this purpose [of knowing the trend in all of the three dimensions of MPI] but its component’ (Ravallion 2011, p. 7–8). Furthermore, ‘the complexity of the exercise [involved in calculating the composite MPI score] renders the resulting index even more opaque and less intuitive than money-metric measures’ (Fischer 2013, p. 12). The implication of missing these weaknesses of the MPI in the debate means that the poverty reduction doubters’ narrative of MPI as a superior measure of poverty to the government’s consumption based report was relatively unchallenged.

Another strategy used by both groups to enhance the hegemony of their representation of the poverty trend in Ethiopia is building discourse collation with the media. The ruling party controls the state-owned media and propagates its own discourse with no space for the other party’s view. Previous research has showed that the state media in Ethiopia lacks autonomy to reflect views that may undermine the regimes credibility (Skjerdal 2012).

The poverty reduction doubters created a coalition with most of the private media try to counter the government’s rapid poverty discourse by creating storyline that shows how life has worsened in the last decade by interviewing ordinary people sometimes with their desperate picture (and interviewing experts on the subject, usually economics professors: see Tesfaye 2010b for instance). According to this group, the independence of the media and the ‘objective view’ of the experts are supposedly the reason for people to believe the position that poverty has not declined or has declined marginally. However, the government accuses the print media of being a propaganda machine for the opposition. This tense relationship with local private media, especially print newspapers and magazines, many believe is the reason behind the closure of 70 newspapers and magazines in the last 20 years and the jailing of many journalists (VOA 2013).

Conclusions and implications

Two discourses of poverty prevalence trends in Ethiopia are competing at the moment. One discourse argues poverty has declined rapidly in the last two decades. The other discourse depicts that poverty hasn’t declined and has remained widespread. This study examined these discourses in detail to understand who the main actors/participants of the debate are and what evidence they use to support their positions. To understand

these discourses, the research analyzed main documents representing each discourse and primary data from interviews.

The study found that the two discourses on poverty prevalence in Ethiopia draw on contradicting statistics. The rapid poverty decline discourse draws on the government's statistics that shows headcount poverty dropped from 44.5% in 1996 to 29.6% in 2010. This group also argues that the economy has been growing fast and has contributed to poverty reduction. Moreover, it argues that doubts about poverty decline are unsubstantiated as poverty reduction has been attested by international organizations. On the other hand, those who doubt poverty decline draw on the multidimensional poverty estimates of OPHI that estimates poverty at 87.3% in 2010, a marginal decline from 93% in 2000 and 90% in 2005. They argue that the MPI score is a better indicator of the measure of poverty than the consumption-based measures. Furthermore, drawing on the discrepancy between IMF's growth of Ethiopian economy with the government (which is higher than IMF's), *the poverty reduction doubters* (1) argue that the economic growth is not as fast as the government claims, (2) blames the statistical system of the country as weak, and (3) accuse the government of fabricating and manipulating data.

The synthesized data shows that poverty numbers are being used as tools for, and manifestation of, ongoing power struggles in Ethiopia whereby different actors are using selectively poverty statistics that promote their political agenda. While doing so, the underlying rationale of actors for choosing one set of statistics over another was not based on the merit of their preferred statistics over the others but on the suitability of the data for their own purposes. Thus, the government disregards statistics except its own, while opposition groups actively use and promote statistics coming from international organizations that depict increasing poverty/slow rates in the reduction of poverty. The paper argued that the underlying cause of such politicization of numbers is linked with the developmental statism ideology of the ruling party in Ethiopia and how it tries to justify its rule in Ethiopia – claiming that it is reducing poverty and bringing development to Ethiopia and therefore should be allowed to continue in power. This study showed that in contexts where a regime's legitimacy is contested and is perceived to be successful in poverty reduction, measuring progress towards poverty becomes highly politicized. As a result, poverty knowledge becomes deeply contested among actors with different interests. In arguing so, the paper also demonstrates how statistics as well as their production and usage are contextually and socially constructed and influenced.

Notes

1. Although I used many texts not paged and presented as html online, for clarity and space, I haven't included paragraph numbers when I cite directly.
2. Cited in <http://www.meleszenawi.com/world-bank-group-2-5-million-ethiopians-lifted-out-of-poverty-over-the-past-5-years-as-a-result-of-strong-economic-growth-video/>

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